

MoJo At 50



FOR

THE

REST

OF

US



Fifty years of fearless journalism

BY MONIKA BAUERLEIN



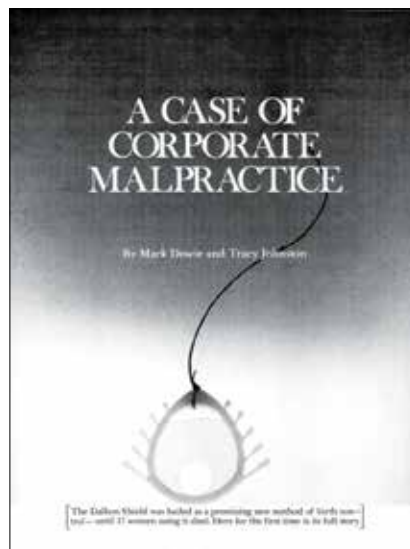
WAR. OIL SHOCKS. A corrupt president and a scandal-ridden administration. Civil rights abuses and government violence. An immense gap between how young and old, men and women, left and right, rural and urban people view the world. A technological revolution that no one quite understands. And, underneath all that, a sense that an era is ending, and the future looks pretty confusing.

That was the mid-1970s, and it was at that moment that a rambunctious, fearless, generous crew of journalists decided that the way to engage with a world in upheaval was to start a magazine unlike any other. One that would tell the truth without hesitation; that would be beholden to its readers, not to a billionaire owner; whose defiant tagline would be “A magazine for the rest of us.”

This magazine, against all odds, somehow managed to survive its first year, and then its second, and then 48 more, and now you hold it in your hand in another moment of upheaval, when ferociously independent journalism is needed like never before.

MOTHER JONES began publishing in 1976, but the prologue begins nine years earlier, when another magazine published an iconic cover: four hands, in men’s dress shirts peeking out of jacket sleeves, holding burning scraps of paper. It wasn’t all just a staged photo illustration: Those were the actual draft cards belonging to *Ramparts*’ editors and its art director—at a time when destroying your draft card was a felony.

Ramparts had begun as a magazine for “the mature American Catholic” but evolved to land at the journalistic frontier of the movement against the Vietnam War. It published investigative reporting and documentary photography, including a



groundbreaking photo essay about what napalm was doing to children. (The foreword was by America’s most famous parenting expert, Dr. Benjamin Spock.) Martin Luther King Jr., who had not yet taken a position on the war, read that issue while grabbing a meal in an airport. As his associate Bernard Lee would later recall, King pushed his plate away when he came to the photos. “Doesn’t it taste any good?” Lee asked. “Nothing will ever taste any good for me until I do everything I can to end that war,” King responded. Soon after, he came out publicly against the war for the first time, and *Ramparts* published his speech.

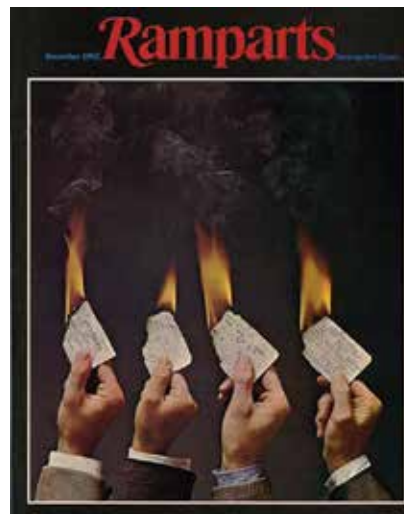
Like most startups then and now, *Ramparts* was staffed by people who hated convention, systems, and process. Staffers (including Jann Wenner, who would go on to found *Rolling Stone*, and Brit Hume, now a senior analyst for Fox News) got used to seeing Henry Luce, the pet monkey belonging to editor-in-chief Warren Hinckle, leaping from cubicle wall to cubicle wall in their San Francisco office. The chaos was creative, but it was also just chaos, and



Hinckle’s champagne tastes (he insisted on first-class tickets and fine hotels for himself and the team) kept pushing the magazine toward the brink. *Ramparts*’ next editors, David Horowitz and Peter Collier, declared that the system “must be overthrown. As humanely as possible, but by any means necessary,” amplified the Black Panthers, and put a picture of a Bank of America branch set on fire by protesters on the cover. (Horowitz and Collier would later become leading conservative activists, a long story stemming from the murder of a colleague they had hooked up with a job for the Panthers.)

Into this mess stepped a trio of journalists from very different corners of a changing America. Paul Jacobs, in his 50s, was a child of the Depression and the New Deal, an organizer turned investigative journalist who’d labored as a farmworker for a story and documented the aftermath of nuclear tests in the Southwest.

Adam Hochschild, barely 30, had worked at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, at an anti-apartheid paper in South Africa, and at *Ramparts* off and on; he would later write a



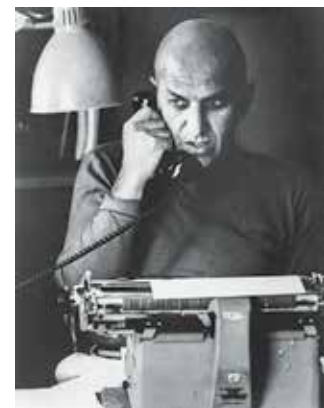
GARY SINICK WILLIAM ROSENTHAL; MOTHER JONES ARCHIVES

gripping memoir about his relationship with his father, who ran an international mining company. Richard Parker, the youngest of the lot at 27, had grown up in Southern California amid the aerospace boom and had run an alternative paper in Santa Barbara.

The trio were brought in to revive *Ramparts*, but the politics—inside and outside the magazine—made that impossible as the revolutionary passions of the 1960s splintered into factional fights. “Presenting a coherent progressive or left view seemed impossible,” Parker says. “And so there was some sense that Adam and Paul and I and others have that, well, we’ve just got to fucking start over.”

What Substack and TikTok are to our moment, new magazines were to the ’70s, and there was a big opening to speak to a new constituency. “Those of us who were political progressives, who cared about social justice, about ecology, the environment, about stopping US military interventions overseas, we didn’t see many places where our voices could reach a large audience,” Hochschild recalls. “There were

Clockwise from left: An early exposé on the Dalkon Shield; *Mother Jones* co-founders Adam Hochschild, Richard Parker, and Paul Jacobs—and an iconic cover of *Ramparts*, where they first worked together



long-established magazines like *The Nation* and *The Progressive* that did a good job, but reached quite small audiences, often in a fairly drab way—just black-and-white type on newsprint-like paper.”

Their new magazine would be something else entirely: iconoclastic, colorful, unapologetically West Coast. It would print on high-quality paper so that color photography would reproduce vividly. It would be well designed and compellingly written. It would have kickass marketing and a solid, monkey-free business operation.

The trio had no idea how to do much of this, but they had a knack for attracting people who did. Louise Kollenbaum, the inaugural art director, concocted powerful visuals on a tiny budget. Photographers offered their work for little or no money, famous illustrators took assignments to be part of something cool, staffers posed for photo illustrations. Jeffrey Klein, a boyish editor with a shock of red hair and a pit bull’s persistence, brought in big pieces, including an essay by Li-li Ch’en that won a National Magazine Award for the magazine’s very

first issue. John Klingel, a publishing executive who later became president of *Reader’s Digest*, helped them figure out how to hire a printer, buy paper, and navigate the *Sopranos*-esque world of magazine distribution. And Bill Jayme, a direct-mail marketing whiz, signed on to help them launch a crowdfunding campaign: They would mail out tens of thousands of letters asking strangers to subscribe to a magazine—they were calling it *New Dimensions*—that told the unvarnished truth.

The reply envelopes came back with a decent response, but something else came in the mail: a cease-and-desist letter from a newsletter named...*New Dimensions*.

“It scared the shit out of us,” Parker recalls. There were printer deadlines to meet for the next mailing; they needed a new name, stat. Parker sat down with Jayme “and our friend Jack Daniel’s” to brainstorm. Sometime after midnight, they landed on the name of a fiery labor organizer from the early 20th century.

The editors were skeptical. Who had ever heard of Mary Harris “Mother” Jones? People wouldn’t know what it meant. “That’s the point!” Jayme insisted.

Not long after, the mail carrier trudged into the cramped office the crew had secured in downtown San Francisco, a space enveloped in the smell of fries from the McDonald’s downstairs. “He said, ‘Oh, such a pisser carrying all these up the stairs’—the elevator didn’t work or something,” Hochschild recalls. The pile of envelopes was enormous. Using the name *Mother Jones* had doubled response over previous mailings. “When we saw that,” Hochschild says, “we knew it was a go.”

The premier issue was set to publish in February 1976. But soon, the small team had a different problem: They had assigned, edited, and fact-checked a bunch of great stories, but what, asked Kollenbaum, was going to be on the cover? Eventually, Dugald Stermer, *Ramparts*’ former art director, created an illustration riffing on the revolutionary flavor with a take on the iconic *Spirit of ’76* painting. Like the magazine’s name, it wasn’t what anyone had planned on. But somehow, it worked.

READING THROUGH those early issues is equal parts nostalgic treasure hunt and shock of recognition. There are exposés

on Nazi war criminals; personal essays of a generation in its adulating phase (“We are... in the midst of a great new social laboratory—the egalitarian marriage”); pieces on communes, the Austin music scene, vegetarian food (“Despite its looks, tofu can be fun”), and “Chinese eye exercises.” But there’s also a “Letter to an Israeli Friend” warning that denying rights to the Palestinian people will harm a nation still emerging from the Holocaust (“Watching Israel is like watching someone in a wheelchair racing down a path toward a precipice”). There’s poetry, short fiction, and a letters page with missives from “Dr. Hunter S. Thompson” of Colorado (confirming an \$8 subscription) and Sen. Frank Church (of the eponymous committee investigating CIA abuses, saying thanks for a complimentary copy).

It’s an eclectic mix, and one that reveals a bit of an identity crisis at the young magazine. “We fought a lot,” recalls Mark Dowie, who was part of that early team. “It was all about: Were we making a service magazine for the left, or were we trying to keep the center from sliding too far to the right?”

The answer, it turned out, was something else, and it landed with a bang in the eighth issue, in November 1976. On the cover was an object that looked like a plastic beetle with a string attached but that many women would have recognized as a Dalkon Shield—a birth control device that had been implanted in millions of patients and had caused serious health issues for some. There had been lawsuits, but the story hadn’t really broken through. Dowie thought *Mother Jones* could change that.

As the business manager, Dowie wasn’t technically a journalist, but he’d had a stint as a reporter at a local paper. “I went to an editorial meeting and said, ‘We’ve been promising hard-hitting investigative reports, particularly corporate stuff, and we’re not delivering.’” What did he have in mind, the editors asked. “I said, ‘Look, you can walk into the lobby of any corporation in America and you have a story.’ And they said, ‘Okay, why don’t you do it?’”

Dowie, who knew a woman harmed by the shield, started digging into the story on his bus commute to work. He read piles of legal documents and research papers; he got on the phone and pestered executives, regulators, lawyers. The result was a piece,

co-bylined by Dowie and freelance journalist Tracy Johnston, that read nothing like the bullet point–laden investigative dossiers you’d find in a newspaper. It had facts, names, and dates, but also characters and a plot. It married dogged reporting with New Journalism panache.

Infections linked to the shield had killed at least 17 women just in the US and left many more infertile. Dowie and Johnston showed that the research behind the device was questionable, that the doctors who invented it had made a fortune by pushing it to market, and that its maker, A.H. Robins, knew the product had issues but had continued to heavily promote it.

The story made a splash, and the little magazine suddenly walked a little taller. This (what Hochschild would later refer to as taking on “the great unelected power wielders of our time—multinational corporations”) was a *mission*.

“Stumbling upon the vacuum of reporting about corporate misdeeds was the big discovery of those early years,” Hochschild says. “Muckraking, in the years before we started publishing, had been mainly conceived of with government and politicians as the target...We began realizing that investigative reporting on corporate malpractice was something very few other people were doing in a systematic way. It was open territory.”

Browsing the issues after the Dalkon Shield reveals the vibe shift. There are more stories on corporate power (a deep dive on labor conditions at a textile mill, a first-person dispatch from “the world of secretaries,” a piece on American oil company corruption in Venezuela). And there’s a media critique emerging, too: Even with investigative reporting gaining traction post-Watergate, it turns out there were still plenty of stories that mainstream media wouldn’t touch. The cover story of the June 1977 issue is about the murder of *Arizona Republic* reporter Don Bolles, whose car was blown up while he was investigating the mob. A team of journalists from around the country came together to finish the story, but the *Republic* wouldn’t print the resulting investigation (claiming it didn’t have sufficient documentation), and the big national outlets mostly shrugged it off. Meanwhile, *MoJo* reported, the Hearst Corporation, which owned the *San Francisco Examiner*

Clockwise from below: Art director Louise Kollenbaum; a 1981 staff meeting with (clockwise from left) David Talbot, Deirdre English, Ruth Henrich, Kollenbaum, Mark Dowie, and Amanda Spake; *MoJo* staff marching in a Pride Parade; a story that cost us of a ton of ads



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and other major papers, was refusing to defend freelance journalist Lowell Bergman in a libel case connected to a murder in San Francisco’s Chinatown. (Bergman and two other journalists, David Weir and Dan Noyes, would go on to found another Bay Area powerhouse: the Center for Investigative Reporting.)

The combination of corporate muckraking and media critique solidified the magazine’s sense of its identity—and its readers’, too. *Mother Jones* frequently printed reader surveys, Hochschild recalls, lists of questions that readers would answer and send back. When asked what kinds of stories they would like to see, “people would always say, ‘I want more stories of activism, of positive news.’ But then when you ask people to actually rate the stories that they read, it would be exposés of corporate malfeasance at the top.”

CORPORATE MALFEASANCE could not have been more in evidence in the story that truly put *Mother Jones* on the map. In the wake of the oil crisis, the small-car market had been booming, and the Ford Motor Company had a bestseller in its subcompact, the Pinto. The company’s brash new president, Lee

Iacocca, had brass-knuckled it into production, decreeing that it must not cost a penny more than \$2,000 or weigh an ounce over 2,000 pounds. Most production lines took 43 months to ramp up; the Pinto started rolling off the line in about half that time.

One design flaw brushed off in the rush to market was the placement of the Pinto’s fuel tank. It was nestled right next to the rear bumper, where four pointy bolts would perforate the tank in even low-speed collisions. Any spark could lead to an explosion—and it did. Between 500 and 900 people, Dowie reported in *Mother Jones*’ September 1977 cover story, had died in Pinto fires and many more had suffered terrible burns.

Those numbers were shocking, but even more so was an internal memo that Dowie obtained: It showed that Ford had carefully calculated the cost of such tragedies versus the cost of fixing the car. An annual toll of 180 deaths and 180 serious injuries would cost about \$50 million. Retooling the assembly line to add an \$11 part would come out to \$137 million. Ford had chosen the cheaper path.

If the Dalkon Shield story had made a splash, this one was a cannonball. Ralph Nader held a press conference announcing

Mother Jones’ findings. The *New York Times* ran a story. Mike Wallace did a long segment on *60 Minutes*. (The *MoJo* team felt a little salty, Dowie recalls, about CBS ripping off their earlier stories, “so when they called this time, we said, ‘Yes, we’ll help you, but you have to credit us on the air.’”) The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration launched an investigation. Eventually, Ford recalled 1.5 million cars—roughly half of all the Pintos it had ever sold—and ended up facing more than 100 lawsuits, including the first-ever criminal prosecution of a company for a product defect. (A jury later found Ford not guilty of reckless homicide.)

“When a little pipsqueak magazine out on the West Coast all of a sudden is getting a lot of national attention,” Dowie recalls, “that’s exhilarating and fun.”

The Pinto story cemented the young magazine’s sense of its “journalism of purpose,” as Parker called it, and left the fretting about carving out this or that position on the left in the rearview mirror.

“I’ve often been asked, ‘Where does *Mother Jones* stand on this?’” Harriet Barlow, a longtime activist who served on the board for nearly 40 years, told me. “The answer is: wherever the best story is.”

Going after Big Pharma or carmakers “is not, per se, a left point of view,” Parker notes. “You don’t have to use the word ‘proletariat.’ You don’t have to talk about class struggle. The idea here is we’re defending and building a community of common values, not that we’re advancing a particular party or even a particular ideology. So that gave *Mother Jones* a broader reach in terms of reputation and avoided allowing critics to pigeonhole it quite as easily as they might have.”

It also proved fortuitous, Parker says, that the magazine was based in San Francisco and never—despite entreaties from some of its supporters—moved to the East Coast to become part of the political media bubble. “One of the strengths is you don’t get caught up in the conventional wisdom that exercises such a powerful hold on what passes for journalism in the area between Boston and Washington.”

Indeed, many of *MoJo*’s biggest investigations in those early years were stories few in the Amtrak corridor had thought of as newsworthy—abuses that were perfectly legal, but outrageous nonetheless. “Smoking: The Truth No One Else Will Print,” in the January 1979 issue, started out this way:

“Every morning my husband coughs and gags for about ten minutes. Some days he wakes up choking. On others he is fine until he stands up, then doubles over retching. After 15 or 20 minutes, he can finish a sentence without gasping, walk across the room without bending over in pain, even pick up our two-year-old son without dropping him. Then he gets dressed, has a cup of coffee and lights his first cigarette of the day.”

In painstaking detail, the story laid out the science on how cigarettes hooked you more effectively than heroin. It would be 20 more years before tobacco executives admitted that they knew.

One by one, *Mother Jones* was biting the hands that fed America’s publishing industry: Cars. Tobacco. Booze. Big Pharma. Beauty products. Most magazines (and not a small portion of the underground press) were bankrolled by marketing budgets; no chance of that here.

But unlike other progressive organizations launched in the ’70s, *MoJo* didn’t have much access to big foundations—journalism was not yet seen as a worthy charitable cause. So where the magazine turned for

survival, over and over again, was its readers. *MoJo* had begun with a determination to find and keep an audience—to compete not just in the marketplace of ideas, but in the actual marketplace, too. It had to convince hundreds of thousands of people each year to subscribe, then deliver them a quality product, and then—because the cost of subscriptions was kept ridiculously low so that more people could afford them—compel those who could afford a little extra to pitch in with a donation, and keep track of all the little transactions and expenses along the way. In a word, it needed to function as a business, but one that made change instead of a profit.

IT ALSO NEEDED to respond to the bigger forces roiling around it—including one that the founders hadn’t quite reckoned with. Within a year of *Mother Jones*’ launch, a group of feminist writers announced a boycott of the magazine, demanding that it do better at including their concerns.

The women’s movement had put gender and sexuality at the center of its politics, but many in the old left viewed those as distractions, too personal and niche. At *Mother Jones*, however, a women’s caucus quickly formed to negotiate with the writers and resolved the strike with a commitment to solicit more articles by women, especially “Third World women,” and to feature at least one explicitly feminist article in every other issue. (In a similar vein, a demand by staff to join the United Auto Workers in 1983 soon led to the magazine recognizing the union.)

“Magazines were incredibly segregated in those days,” recalls Deirdre English, who came on board in 1978 and became editor-in-chief in 1980. “Women were not taken seriously as readers by the left magazines in general. The idea that *Mother Jones* would be a magazine that was read pretty much equally by men and women was a big accomplishment.”

In 1981, the magazine published an essay by writer Dorothea Lynch, who had asked her husband, storied photographer Eugene Richards, to document her breast cancer treatment. “This was back in the day where people were, unbelievably, still not talking about breast cancer,” Kollenbaum says. “Nobody had seen pictures like that in the media. It was kind of still a secret.”

The following year, *Mother Jones* published an essay by Nora Gallagher about another secret in plain sight—“a group of diseases that...are causing a trembling among doctors and gay men. They are known by the acronym AID, which stands for acquired immune deficiency.” At a time when newspapers were still struggling to acknowledge the existence of gay people, Gallagher described the harrowing questions men were asking themselves and each other. There was “talk of fearing a quarantine, a ‘reason to round us up.’” One man, who describes his life before the illness as “Peter Pan, the magical boy who didn’t grow up,” wondered “whether I brought all this on myself.”

BY THE LATE 1970s, *Mother Jones* was among the fastest-growing magazines in the country. It was one of just 37 publications used to prepare the daily newsbrief for President Jimmy Carter—the circulation team even used a photo of Carter reading *MoJo* in its promotions, ignoring a cease-and-desist letter from the White House.

But change was on the wind. Carter was in a tight race against the ex-governor of California Ronald Reagan, who promised to roll back the social changes of the past decade. A new religious right movement was gearing up to help make it happen. And in *MoJo*’s Bay Area home, tech companies were building something called the “personal computer” that would change the way everyone lived.

At *Mother Jones*, the founders had all moved on. Jacobs died at just 59, his lung cancer widely attributed to the radiation he’d absorbed while investigating nuclear tests. Hochschild was eager to get back to writing (he has published 11 books to date, including the award-winning *King Leopold’s Ghost*). Parker (who went on to an acclaimed career as a Harvard economist) started a consulting firm.

This is where a story like this would normally end. The groundbreaking startup would struggle after its founders’ departure. It would have trouble finding an identity in a new political environment and its audience would drift away. Maybe it would hang around for a few zombie-esque years, coasting off the innovation and experimentation of its past.

But that didn’t happen. *Mother Jones* is still here, and not only that, its reach and

impact have grown dramatically. Back in 1976, the magazine’s founders went after audiences and stories not well served by traditional media. Every one of the 50 years since has been defined by that mission. In 1993, *MoJo* became the first general interest magazine on the web. In the 2000s, when our current editor-in-chief, Clara Jeffery, and I came into the fold, we launched a Washington bureau as counter to the insider journalism that had amplified the Bush administration’s lies about Iraq.

In the 2010s, as more and more people were getting their news from social platforms, *MoJo* built a big footprint there; then, as audiences turned to TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, we doubled down there as well. And two years ago, we merged with our crosstown frenemy and longtime partner, the Center for Investigative Reporting, creators of the acclaimed radio show and podcast *Reveal*. With unprecedented challenges for independent news and democracy, having a bigger impact together seemed much more important than whatever was keeping us separate.

While our newsroom of 75 people is less than 5 percent the size of, say, the behemoth *New York Times*, it punches way above its weight, reaching some 10 million people a month regularly and sometimes double that. There are days, astonishingly, when more people watch *Mother Jones* videos than watch either Sean Hannity or the *CBS Evening News*.

This team has also won virtually every major prize in journalism—shelves full of National Magazine Awards, Polks, duPonts, Emmys, Webbs, etc. But the biggest reward has always been going after stories nobody else would and seeing them change the world. In the 1980s, under Editor-in-Chief Doug Foster and the tagline “People, Politics, and Other Passions,” the magazine investigated Big Tobacco and weapons makers and profiled the likes of Jesse Jackson, Spike Lee, and Bono. In the 1990s, long before *Citizens United*, came a string of investigations into the corrosive effects of money in politics and how Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh were laying the groundwork for what would become Trumpism.

In the 2000s, we charted the caravan of lies that led America into the Iraq War and exposed how the fossil fuel industry was undermining climate science. We’ve published manifestos that turned into movements; Bill McKibben laid out the mission for 350.org with an essay, “The Most Important Number on Earth,” in these pages. We investigated the Oath Keepers a decade before January 6. In 2012, DC Bureau Chief David Corn broke the 47 percent story that changed the course of that presidential election, revealing that GOP nominee Mitt Romney had insulted half the electorate as slackers looking for government handouts.

We sent reporters undercover into private prisons, border militias, and the Amazon shipping universe. At a time when other news outlets were treating Donald Trump’s presidential campaign as entertainment, we probed his business deals and the extremist movements he was bringing into the mainstream, and revealed the FBI investigation into his dealings with Vladimir Putin. We created the first database of mass shootings and calculated the price we all pay for gun manufacturer profits. While big publishers



Clockwise from lower left: Hochschild with current CEO Monika Bauerlein and Editor-in-Chief Clara Jeffery; DC Bureau Chief David Corn (right) discusses the 47 percent story on *Face the Nation*; reporter Shane Bauer poses in his private prison guard uniform; *Reveal* host Al Letson

FACE THE NATION: JAMES WEST; MATT LISACK; REVEAL

were making deals with Facebook, we exposed how its algorithms manipulated millions. And in a sweeping historical investigation from the *Reveal* team and our friends at the Center for Public Integrity, we showed how the US government took away land it had given to formerly enslaved people after the Civil War.

There were lots of bumps, and more than a few near-death experiences, along the way. Michael Moore was dramatically booted from the editor's chair after four months in 1986 (his out-of-court settlement helped fund his breakthrough documentary, *Roger & Me*). The Reagan-era IRS came after *Mojo*'s nonprofit status (we won, but not without major legal bills and headaches). In the '90s, we were sued by a famed Republican operative for revealing that two ex-wives had accused him of domestic abuse. In 2013 came a massive lawsuit from a dark-money billionaire and Romney campaign finance chair. (More legal bills and headaches before we won, in both cases.)

And then there's just the struggle underneath it all: It's incredibly hard to find the money to keep it all going. Careful budgeting (okay, often penny-pinching) has helped, and so have the hardest-working business-side professionals in the field. But what has primarily kept *Mother Jones* alive for these 50 years is support from hundreds of thousands of readers (and now viewers and listeners, too) who believe, as we do, that journalistic independence is one of the strongest counterforces to autocracy.

Never in recent history has that danger been as clear and present as it is right now. Enough said about that.

But also, never in recent history has it been more evident what we can do about it. Back in 1976, when *Mojo* was one of just a handful of nonprofit newsrooms, many sneered at the idea that public interest journalism cannot be left to profit-seeking owners. The last 50 years have put that argument to rest. Now, as much of what's left of the media industry crumbles and caves around us, it's time to commit to something better—journalism by and for “the rest of us.” ■

Additional research was provided by Dru Sefton and by Adiel Kaplan, whose oral history of global investigative journalism is in development at Columbia University.



Breaking barriers, one byline at a time

BY DEIRDRE ENGLISH

AS I PAGE THROUGH colorful old copies of the magazines from my eight years at *Mother Jones*, memories start firing. I came on board as an editor in 1979, just as we were moving into the loft space *Rolling Stone* vacated when it fled to New York, supposedly because founder Jann Wenner's then-spouse had a mortal fear of the Big One. Those were the days of being in an office all together, a small band of brothers and sisters, working long hours for slim pay, walking the copy from desk to desk as the magazine-making process played out in physical space. No texting or email, so we popped into offices for quick conversations and used the phone a lot, calling writers and sources all over the country.

We edited with mechanical pencils and colored pens, using precise copy editor's marks that might cover a page edge to edge—spidery corrections, up carets, side arrows, and phrases in balloons. “Cut and paste” meant actual scissors and glue, and then those pages went off to the fact-checking department, then and now a severe taskmaster (the best libel defense being accuracy), and next to our visionary art director, Louise Kollenbaum. She wanted to give readers “access to the thinking,” she recalls, so she paired our long and so-serious articles with myriad color illustrations, photos, pull quotes, sidebars, and cartoons.

I sometimes hear people say that they remember *Mother Jones* from the '60s, but chronologically and culturally, the magazine (founded in 1976) was a decidedly post-'60s phenomenon. As one of our founders, Adam Hochschild, would write a couple of years later, during the wildest



Deirdre English was the editor-in-chief of *Mother Jones* when few women held such positions.

days of the '60s, many had believed the system was “so weak that a few shouts, kicks and a good hard shove would bring it all crashing down.” Instead, among the “silent majority,” resentment grew against the college-based youth movement, hippies, and antiwar protests and against Black, Latino, and other uprisings. Revolutionary ideals and people were violently suppressed in crackdowns led by the FBI, CIA, and local police departments, while bomb-throwing militants also just burned out because of their own extremism and unpopularity. By 1969, Richard Nixon was swept into office by conservative resentment, a pattern we would see repeated: Nixon, Reagan, Trump.

When Nixon was unseated in 1974, it was not Democrats or the left that turned the tide, but *journalism*. The Watergate revelations made national heroes of investigative reporters and proved that even the president could be ousted thanks to malfeasance exposed. But then, after four years

of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan rode another swell of conservatism, just as I was named editor-in-chief in 1980, and so my tenure coincided with a decade of backlash—but also continuing social change, what some have called “the long '60s,” or the persistence of resistance. The backlash never fully succeeded.

As we baby boomers emerged from our freewheeling 20s, many became progressive professionals: social entrepreneurs, nonprofit leaders, affordable housing developers, alternative energy pioneers. Scholars were reforming schools and universities with more inclusive curricula. Many of us anticipated the emergence of a new voting majority, a left-populist “rainbow coalition” in Jesse Jackson's 1984 phrase (a forebear to the “purple America” that Barack Obama would proclaim in his 2008 campaign), incorporating all those too long excluded from the American Dream—women, racial and ethnic

communities, the working class and the poor. It seemed so logical, so possible, so... likely. And I believe it is still within reach.

I ASKED SOME of my colleagues from those days which stories they remembered best after 50 years. Mark Dowie, our chief of investigative reporting, answered unequivocally: a special issue from 1979, with a cover that read “The Corporate Crime of the Century,” about the practice of exporting products banned in the United States to other countries. In partnership with the Center for Investigative Reporting, we revealed what this meant on the ground: Hundreds of Iraqis had died from grain coated with a fungicide banned in the US. Pajamas treated with Tris, a carcinogenic fire retardant that had set off a panic among US parents, were shipped overseas; so were pacifiers and teething rings linked to choking deaths. Both Depo-Provera and the Dalkon Shield, dangerous (continued on page 74)

contraceptives that could not be sold here, were being sent abroad in US-sponsored population programs.

The project won a National Magazine Award and led to a book called *Circle of Poison* by CIR reporters Mark Schapiro and David Weir. Carter signed an executive order banning the practice. Reagan would later rescind that order, but eventually, legislation was put in place to at least inform other countries whether products for export had been banned in the US.

For Hochschild, a landmark memory was an evening in Moscow in 1979, in the smoke- and vodka-infused apartment of Andrei Sakharov, perhaps the Soviet Union's most distinguished scientist, whom he was interviewing for *Mother Jones*: "I felt immensely humbled to see this man...put his immense prestige in support of dissidents under threat from the Kremlin," he told me. "I felt in the presence of people willing to sacrifice everything for their ideals." Less than two years later, Sakharov and his wife, Yelena Bonner, would be sentenced to internal exile for opposing the USSR's war in Afghanistan.

At the time, there was no other woman editing a national "thought leader" magazine—the term of art in our trade—and bylines for women were scarce. Men and women mostly read different magazines, and feminist writing was generally directed at women, as in *Ms.*, founded just a few years before *Mother Jones*. This was a profound cleavage among progressives: Feminists were growing by leaps and bounds in their understanding of patriarchy and gender discrimination, but men were often barely aware. Bringing women's voices into what had been male-dominated political conversations—and showing that feminism was good for men, too—was a big step.

I am proud of assigning stories by the late and much-missed Barbara Ehrenreich, along with Katha Pollitt, Doris Lessing, Vivian Gronick, and so many more. Kollenbaum brought in countless women as artists, cartoonists, and photographers, such as Sue Coe, Roz Chast, and Susan Meiselas, often spotlighting their work at the beginning of what would be significant careers.

Fiction was another way to bring fresh voices into our pages, as art is often a step ahead of politics. Alice Walker gave us a complex meditation on marriage and abortion, and an excerpt from *The Color*

Purple—which, shockingly to some, centered Black feminist issues with the type of writing that would come to be called intersectional. Maxine Hong Kingston wrote "The Brother in Vietnam," a story about Chinese American men who had been drafted into an anti-Asian war. Bharati Mukherjee's "Angela" traced the journey of a girl adopted from Bangladesh; Grace Paley wrote on marriage and her neighborhood association; Rudolfo Anaya, a founder of Chicano literature, shared an excerpt from *Bless Me, Ultima*, which later won the Premio Quinto Sol award.

Kollenbaum, herself of Native American ancestry, put Russell Means, a leader in the American Indian Movement, on the cover of the issue featuring his essay on the ravages of "European mentality" on the Earth. Reggie Major and Cecil Brown and Manning Marable wrote on racial discrimination, Thulani Davis on Black mayors, Roger Wilkins on Jesse Jackson. Margaret Atwood wrote about anti-American feeling in Canada, Alan Bérubé explored the origins of gay liberation in WWII, and Arlie Russell Hochschild, in a piece about flight attendants, introduced the term "emotional labor" and drew attention to the habit of men telling women to smile more.

We editors all wrote for the magazine, too. Amanda Spake delved into a brutal attack on a young female hitchhiker and the "mythic rage" particular to men that led to the crime. Doug Foster, who would later become editor-in-chief, investigated the dumping of radioactive waste at sea. Jeffrey Klein, another future editor-in-chief, provided a ferocious interrogation of *60 Minutes* legend Mike Wallace, who for months had turned down Klein's requests for an interview. Finally, after learning that Wallace was to fly to New York from Los Angeles on a particular day, Klein booked the seat next to him and grilled him midair.

One time, our great copy editor, Rick Clogher, disappeared for a spell and came back with a fabulous story about having infiltrated the Bohemian Grove, a retreat for rich and powerful men that has been the subject of countless conspiracy theories since. Another editor, David Talbot, had a knack for the kind of headline we didn't yet call viral ("My Mother's Name is Afton Blake. My Father's Number 28. Sperm-Banking in America") and went on to found the first major digital magazine, *Salon*. We often looked beyond our borders: Orville Schell traveled to China, where he encountered a nascent underground punk

culture. Bill Finnegan wrote about "un-learning apartheid" as a teacher in South Africa. We especially focused on Central America during those blood-soaked years when the US sponsored the region's repressive armies. In a 1981 special package, "The White Hand of Terror in El Salvador," we showed grisly photos, including of children murdered by US-trained forces, images the rest of the press shied away from. In 1985, I went to Nicaragua, interviewed President Daniel Ortega, and raised doubts about the sustainability of Sandinista ideals.

When I mentioned to a wise colleague that I was writing about my years at *Mother Jones*, she challenged me: What did we miss? Did the magazine overlook one of the biggest trends of the era, the shafting of the working class? When it comes to the content, the answer is decidedly no. We ran pieces by writers like Ron Chernow (who would go on to write the Alexander Hamilton biography on which Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical is based), extolling progressive unionism and investigating the "New Pinkertons." Studs Terkel brought us the lament of a logger over his life and the life of the forest. Barbara Garson wrote about the fresh hell of data-entry jobs in "The Electronic Sweatshop" in 1981.

Our readers, though, were largely college educated and middle class, as they generally are for long-form magazines, even as right-wing radio and TV made inroads with working-class audiences. This is why I am so hopeful about today's *Mother Jones*, which is reaching audiences not just in print, but on YouTube, social media, and podcast platforms, featuring personalities who can connect with a wide range of communities.

When I look back at the early years, I still mainly see my co-workers, so many more than I could mention. In hindsight, they are all good-looking, caring, witty, and whip smart. To them, my message is: Those were the days, my friends.

For today's *MoJo* audience, my message is that our experience offers a hope now. In the Reagan era, the movements we championed, the accountability we demanded, were hit with a brutal backlash. But our journalism persevered in exposing and opposing, as it does so forcefully today. The audience for that work has only grown in size and in diversity. Now, *MoJo* stands on a firmer foundation than ever, and we know in our hearts that it's exactly when accountability and justice are most under attack that independent, reader-supported journalism will rise to the challenge. ■

THE COVER STORY

A spin through some of our most memorable—and cringey—issues from the past 50 years

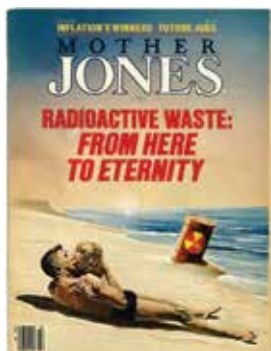
BY IAN GORDON



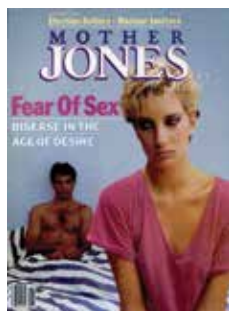
November 1977: “When *Mother Jones* asked me to write about women and success, I thought: How optimistic, so few of us are in danger of it.” —Rita Mae Brown



June 1978: Remember barcode moral panic?



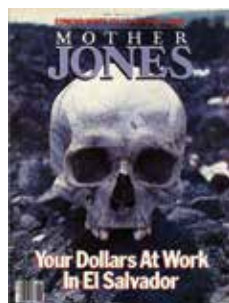
July 1981: “The sailor pissing over the side is a more important source of pollution” than nuclear waste dumping, says a former Atomic Energy Commission official.



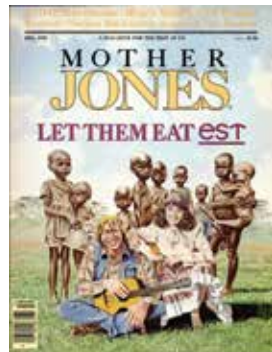
November 1982: A deep dive into STDs zeroes in on a mysterious illness “causing a trembling among doctors and gay men.”



January 1983: Christopher Hitchens memorably skewers Tom Wolfe’s chummy relationships with conservative elites.



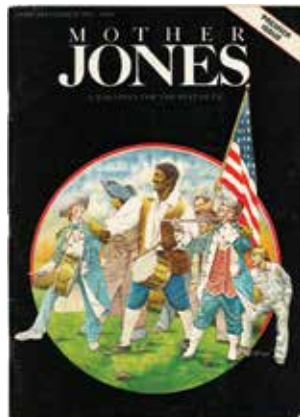
June 1983: Co-founder Adam Hochschild and photographer Susan Meiselas expose the truth about a US-funded dirty war.



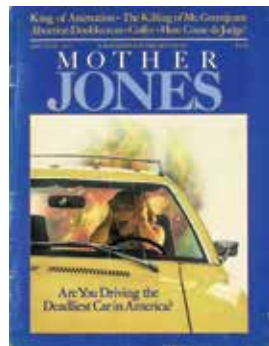
December 1978: With the Center for Investigative Reporting, we dig into the quasi-religious self-help group EST.



January 1979: Tobacco companies pull years’ worth of ads as a result of this story.



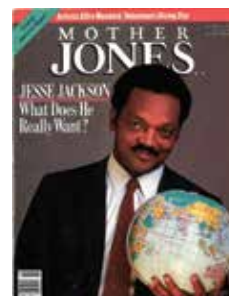
March 1976: For our premier issue, illustrator Dugald Stermer recasts *The Spirit of '76* with a movement vibe.



October 1977: Art director Louise Kollenbaum borrows her uncle Al’s Ford Pinto for the cover shot of the exposé that put *MoJo* on the map.



August 1990: The first of Ralph’s short-lived “Nader’s Nineties” columns.



October 1987: As Editor Douglas Foster later notes, the answer to this question is: “To win.”



December 1983: Arlie Russell Hochschild, writing about men telling women to smile more, coins the phrase “emotional labor.”



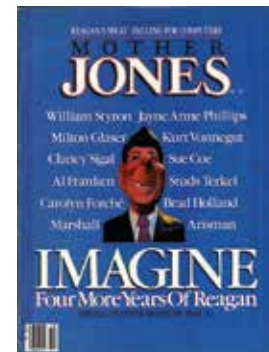
June 1991: Bart Simpson’s second cover appearance, along with his sister Lisa—a *MoJo* reader if ever there was one.



February 1992: When the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons calls small breasts “deformities,” you have to put a boob on the cover.



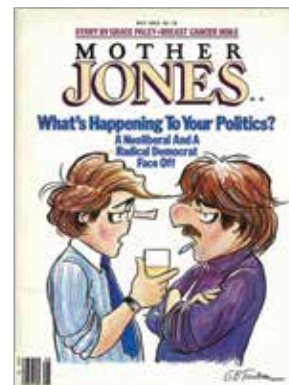
June 1988: Or, as we call it, “the sex tornado issue.”



October 1984: William Styron! Kurt Vonnegut! Al Franken! Carolyn Forché!



May 1989: A smoldering Bono in our “People, Politics, and Other Passions” era.



May 1985: *Doonesbury* creator Garry Trudeau illustrates a still-familiar tension.



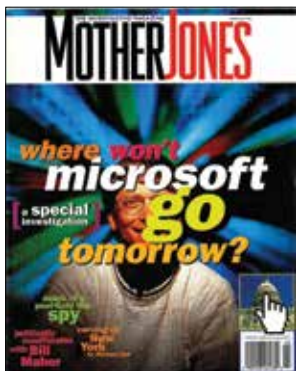
February 1997: Artist Philip Burke captures the controlled chaos of political celebrity for several covers in the '90s.



September 1989: Resting Spike face.



September 1986: Michael Moore’s first issue as *MoJo*’s editor, in what would be a fiery four-month stint. He famously took his settlement pay to help make *Roger & Me*.



February 1998: Bill Gates, writes Editor Jeffrey Klein, was “instrumental in making a mindless world attractive.”



October 2000: We skewer the overhyped threat of a foreign terrorist attack—a year before 9/11. Whoops.



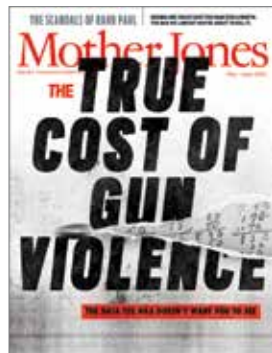
June 2005: The “scientists disagree” narrative has held up climate action for decades. We expose how ExxonMobil created it.



October 2006: An exhaustive timeline of how the Bush administration—with the help of mainstream media—sold the Iraq War.



August 2014: Dan Schulman gives the dark-money Koch brothers the tabloid treatment.



June 2015: Our deep data dive finds that gun violence costs America \$229 billion a year—more than \$700 per person.



October 2015: Tim Murphy profiles Bernie Sanders, whose wild presidential run is still on the Mount Rushmore of populist insurgencies.



August 2016: Shane Bauer’s epic undercover investigation causes private prison company stock to tank.



February 2007: Jack Hitt’s provocative essay could’ve run anytime in the previous—or following—decade.



April 2007: Here’s hoping we don’t end up making an *Iran Handbook for Dummies* cover.



February 2009: We didn’t know just how much of a balancing act the Obama years would be.



October 2010: Julia Whitty unmarks BP’s lies about its “clean-up” of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.



October 2016: The first of our 18(!) Trump covers. (Bill Clinton and George W. Bush tie for second, with five covers each.)



August 2017: The definitive guide to the hack-and-leak operation that threatened American democracy.



December 2018: Okay, so maybe we were a bit optimistic...



April 2019: As many publishers cut deals with Facebook, we expose how it is poisoning the information ecosystem.



December 2010: Nailed it.



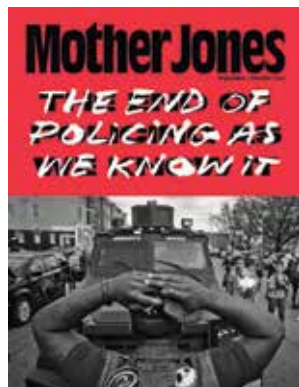
August 2011: Co-Editors Monika Bauerlein and Clara Jeffery unpack the “do more with less” trend.



April 2012: Gabriel Mac goes undercover in the e-commerce supply chain.



February 2013: Kevin Drum probes reams of research to deliver a compelling thesis: Lead exposure caused the spike in violent crime in the late ’70s and ’80s.



October 2020: While police protests grip the country, Samantha Michaels spotlights alternative visions of community safety.



June 2023: Frequent contributor Bill McKibben pushes progressives to build, baby, build.



February 2024: A year before Big Tech overlords join Trump on the inauguration stage, our oligarchy issue calls it what it is.



April 2026: This callback to our first cover features Pete Hegseth bringing up the rear, bottle in hand.

MOJO AT 50

FRAME

BY

FRAME

Sharp, immersive photography has been
crucial to the magazine from the start.

BY MARK MURRMANN

1



I AM A 29 YEAR OLD FEMALE WHO LOVES PLANTS AND ANIMALS WHO CAME TO SAN FRANCISCO FROM A QUIET TOWN IN OREGON 3 1/2 YEARS AGO. I DON'T LIKE IT HERE!

THE CITY HAS MADE ME DISLIKE MYSELF NOW I GET DEPRESSED EASILY, WHICH MAKES ME SLEEP ALOT AND WATCH ALOT OF HORROR MOVIES. I GUESS THE PICTURE SHOWS ME IN A SO-SO MOOD AND IN A SIMPLE WAY OF LIVING.

NO MONEY MEANS LIVING IN THE PITS:

Anne Williams

2



3



1976-1985

ORIGINS

Early *Mother Jones* drew heavily from the traditions of humanist documentary photography, which focused on the everyday experiences of ordinary people. The magazine championed visual storytelling that brought readers into Central American wars, political campaigns, and the struggles of American life. Much of the work took a direct and unsentimental approach, grounded in the idea that visceral photography could expose injustice and build empathy to spark change. The visual identity of *Mother Jones* under the leadership of founding art director Louise Kollenbaum took shape: serious, immersive, and engaged with the world.

1. Jim Goldberg "Living at the Hotel California," August 1978

This photo, the first Goldberg published in a magazine, became the basis of his first book, *Rich and Poor* (1985). It established his signature style of displaying handwritten messages by the photos' subjects on the images. (Magnum Photos)

2. Susan Meiselas "White Hand of Terror: How the Peace Was Lost in El Salvador," June 1981

The *mano blanca*, or "white hand," was a sign left by Salvadoran paramilitary death squads on the homes of rebels they killed during the country's civil war. (Magnum Photos)

3. Eugene Richards "This Strange Knowledge," May 1981

Richards' photo essay centered on his first wife, writer Dorothea Lynch, and her battle with breast cancer, which ultimately led to her death in 1983. Some of the images became part of the book *Exploding Into Life*, which combined Lynch's journals and Richards' photos in a meditation on mortality.

1986-1995

SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY

In 1988, Kerry Tremain took the reins as art director and, with photographers Michelle Vignes and Ken Light, launched the *Mother Jones* International Fund for Documentary Photography, which supported, and often published, long-term photojournalism projects from the likes of Joseph Rodriguez and Nan Goldin. The magazine considered photography “an essential component of its reporting,” Light says. The stories of this decade were closer, quieter, and more intimate, reflecting a broader shift in documentary photography toward extended relationships and subjective experience. Often unsettling, many of the images explored the emotional terrain of people confronting the country’s biggest problems.

1. Ken Light “I Will Send for You or I Will Come Home Rich,” November 1988

This piece, which shows three migrants being apprehended while hiding in the trunk of a car 50 yards from the Mexican border in Southern California, was taken from the 1988 book *To the Promised Land*. (Contact Press)

2. Joseph Rodriguez “Gangstas,” January 1994

“Coming out of the streets of New York myself, I felt connected in some sense,” Rodriguez says of his subject. “I was tired of seeing the news covering gangs as animals.” (Gallery Stock)

3. Nan Goldin “Among Friends,” January 1992

Goldin’s work here feels ahead of its time in its focus on people who “are going in and out of drag,” as Carole Naggar wrote in an essay accompanying the photos: “They embody the fantasy that gender is malleable.” (© Nan Goldin, courtesy the artist and Gagosian)





1996–2007

GLOBALIZATION AND WAR

With troops on the ground in the former Yugoslavia, Liberia, and of course Iraq and Afghanistan, the magazine's reporting increasingly focused on global dynamics such as war, migration, and the environment. Our photography followed suit, documenting the human consequences of political and economic decisions. Images of this period often emphasized aftermath and impact over spectacle: wounded soldiers, displaced families, polluted landscapes, and communities caught in cycles of conflict.

1. Lana Šlezić “Hidden Half: Women in Afghanistan,” July 2007

Šlezić spent two years traveling Afghanistan, documenting the impact of the war on women's lives. This photo features Malalai Kakar, who worked as a police officer before the rise of the Taliban and who later went unveiled to educate women about their rights.

2. Tim Hetherington “Soldiers in a Forgotten War,” January 2004

In *Which Way Is the Front Line From Here?*, the posthumous documentary about Hetherington, he talks about working in Liberia, looking for photos that tell a side of war less seen. This quiet shot of a young Liberian man saying goodbye to his sweetheart before heading to battle exemplifies Hetherington's work: unexpectedly tender, reflective images of young men caught up in tumultuous times. (Imperial War Museums)

3. Donna DeCesare “Deporting America's Gang Culture,” July 1999

DeCesare returned to a country featured prominently in *Mother Jones'* early years: El Salvador. This time, though, the focus turned to the United States sending Salvadoran immigrant gang members back to their home country—returning the children of those who fled the violence of the 1980s and in turn creating new problems for the beleaguered Central American country.

4. Nina Berman “Returning From Iraq, the Damage Done,” March 2004

As the first waves of soldiers returned from Afghanistan and Iraq, frequent contributor Berman turned her camera on the complicated ways in which these veterans processed being back home. One of her subjects, 22-year-old Luis Calderon, was a former Army tank operator who was destroying a mural of Saddam Hussein when part of the wall crashed down, breaking his neck and paralyzing him. (Redux)

2008-2015

CRISIS AT HOME

The financial collapse of 2008 and its long tail turned the magazine's gaze toward more domestic stories. When I came on as photo director in late 2007, I added more visual work to the rapidly growing website. Throughout the late 2000s and early 2010s, photo essays explored economic collapse, environmental damage, gun violence, and the erosion of working-class life in America. There was room for fun, too—photographers like Bryce Duffy, Gregg Segal, and Chris Buck contributed oddball and often humorous portraiture.

1. Bryce Duffy "Of Mormons and (Gay) Marriage," March 2010

Longtime Republican operative Fred Karger dressed as the Lone Ranger for his portrait in a story about his fight against Proposition 8, the California initiative aimed at preventing same-sex marriage.

2. Danny Wilcox Frazier "What Killed Aiyana Stanley-Jones?" November 2010

Pairing Wilcox Frazier with reporter Charlie LeDuff gave readers an unparalleled insight into the decimation of Detroit. A lot of photographers documented the blight, but this piece told a unique story of how cops shot and killed a 7-year-old girl when they burst into her home with a television crew in tow. And it led to an all-too-rare outcome: accountability for the police. (VII/Redux)

3. Stacy Kranitz "Merchants of Meth: How Big Pharma Keeps the Cooks in Business," July 2013

Kranitz remembers this story—which looked at how police in rural Kentucky were playing whack-a-mole as they tried to stop the theft of Sudafed for use in meth—as one of the craziest projects she's ever been part of.



2016–2025

PROTEST AND PANDEMIC

Over the past decade, *Mother Jones*' photography has often trained its sights on resistance movements and unfolding political crises: Black Lives Matter protests, climate organizing, immigration and the US–Mexico border, labor struggles, and the Covid pandemic. Many of the photographers represent a new generation working within or alongside the communities they photograph.

1. Ada Trillo “Our Country Is Full,” November 2020

Raised on the southern border, Trillo gave readers an inside perspective on a migrant caravan headed to the United States—and the ginned-up panic about it. In this photo, a young Honduran boy scrambles under a heavy gate at the Mexico–Guatemala border, where the caravan was stopped.

2. Zen Lefort “I Didn’t Come Here to Lose”: How a Movement Was Born at Standing Rock,” January 2017

Lefort embedded with groups protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in the Dakotas in 2016. “I shared their daily lives—the freezing nights, the meals, the silences, the stories,” Lefort remembers. “I was 23; we were almost all the same age, and that shared youth bound us together with a kind of quiet certainty.”

3. Julie Dermansky “A Portrait of a ‘Last Responder’: The Funeral Director Serving Louisiana’s Virus- Stricken Communities,” August 2020

Published in a special issue focused entirely on the Covid pandemic, Dermansky’s photo essay looked at the work of funeral home operator Courtney Baloney. His business, located in Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley,” catered largely to the African American community, which was hit particularly hard by the pandemic.

4. Rian Dundon “Blood on the Sidewalk: A Look at the Political Clashes of the Trump Era,” October 2019

Beginning in 2017, Dundon has been photographing the political confrontations that have rocked the country, including this faceoff at a Milo Yiannopoulos rally at the University of California, Berkeley.

